

bmj.com news roundup

Full versions of these stories are available at: bmj.com/content/vol330/issue7483/#NEWS_ROUNDUP

Justice department fails to mention emergency contraception after rape

More than 200 US medical organisations, religious leaders, women's health advocates, and groups providing advice for people who have been sexually assaulted have asked the US Department of Justice to correct its guidelines for treating people who have been raped because they fail to mention emergency contraception.

The issue is controversial with US anti-abortion groups because some believe that life begins at conception and that prevention of implantation, which can happen with emergency contraception, is murder.

In September 2004 the Department of Justice published the first national guidelines for caring for people who have been sexually assaulted. They offer far more information on checking patients for sexually transmitted infections than on the risk of pregnancy after rape.

The guidelines say that health workers should discuss the possibility of pregnancy with women who have been raped, give a pregnancy test for those who might have become pregnant, and "discuss treatment options with patients, including reproductive health services."

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

The Department of Justice's guidelines can be seen at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ovw/206554.pdf

Treatment centres may destabilise NHS, doctors claim

The introduction of NHS treatment centres dedicated exclusively to elective surgery and diagnostic tests means that patients are being seen and treated faster, according to a report released by the health secretary, John Reid, this week.

But the BMA has raised concerns that if such centres continue



Mother who drowned her five children is granted a retrial after witness gave false evidence

Andrea Yates, the Texan woman convicted in 2002 of drowning her five children in a bath while having postnatal depression, has been granted a new trial after it was found that an expert medical witness for the prosecution had given false evidence at her original trial.

Dr Park Dietz (pictured), a mental health expert for the prosecution, who was also a consultant for the television programme *Law and Order*, had told the trial court jury that one episode of the programme featured a woman with postpartum depression who drowned her children in the bath and was found insane. He said it was aired shortly before Ms Yates did the same.

A panel of three judges at the appeal court in Houston said last week that the statement was false; there was no such episode. The falsehood had been discovered shortly after the jury convicted Ms Yates, but before she was sentenced. The jury was told about the falsehood during the sentencing hearing, at which Ms Yates received life imprisonment. The prosecution had pushed for the death penalty.

Fred Charatan *Florida*

to siphon off patients, traditional hospitals may be unsustainable in the long run.

Waiting lists are at their lowest since records began, according to Mr Reid, or at least at their lowest since 1987, when the Department of Health first began collecting comparable data. The centres have been particularly useful in specialties that have historically attracted the longest waiting lists, such as orthopaedics and ophthalmology.

Nigel Edwards, director of the NHS Confederation, has warned, "The removal of large amounts of elective work from existing hospitals can threaten the viability of the services that remain."

The BMA also warned that the health sector should respond cautiously to the government's claims. "The BMA has always welcomed the possibility of treatment centres cutting waiting

times; however, from the start we have raised concerns that they would destabilise NHS hospitals' economies, and this is exactly what is happening," said Dr Paul Miller, chairman of the BMA Joint Consultants Committee. Madeleine Brettingham *London*

Case management to be used for people with chronic conditions

A substantial overhaul of the care of patients with chronic diseases based on case management, coordinated by a new type of health professional—the community matron—was announced by the UK government last week.

John Reid, the health secretary, announced that the new system will provide a more

structured approach to the provision of care by health and social services to people with chronic conditions, including diabetes, asthma, and arthritis in England and Wales. NHS and social care organisations will be expected to introduce case management later this year for vulnerable people with complex long term conditions.

The aim is to treat patients sooner, nearer to home, and earlier in the course of their disease to improve their quality of life, reduce emergency hospital admissions, and, in some cases, prevent premature death.

Mr Reid said that the NHS aimed to have 3000 community matrons in place by March 2007. District nurses currently have the most similar role and are expected to make up a large proportion of the community matrons. Susan Mayor *London*

Supporting People with Long Term Conditions is available at www.dh.gov.uk

Increase in autism due to change in definition, not MMR vaccine

Changes in the definition of autism, rather than use of the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine, led to increased diagnosis of autism in the United States and probably in Europe, says a study from the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota (*Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 2005;159:37-44).

Before the late 1980s and early 1990s, children with autism were diagnosed as retarded or having developmental delay, lead author William Barbaresi, a developmental paediatrician, told the *BMJ*.

The prevalence of autism increased more than eightfold in the United States, from 5.5 (95% confidence interval 1.4 to 9.5) per 100 000 children in 1980-3 to 44.9 (32.9 to 56.9) per 100 000 in 1995-7.

The diagnosis of autism became more precise with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, third edition, revised in 1987.